



U.S. Immigration
and Customs
Enforcement

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News Release

ICE AGENTS RETURN \$4,700 TO ELDERLY HOUSTON WOMAN *Woman says she's sent at least \$20,000 to telemarketer*

HOUSTON, Texas — U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) returned \$4,700 to an elderly Houston woman today, part of an estimated \$20,000 taken from her by telemarketing con artists operating in the United States and Canada.

The woman, who lives in West Houston, says so far she's wired more than \$20,000 to a company located in the eastern United States. The scammers told her she had won a Canadian lottery, but that she needed to pay taxes and customs fees before they could send the winnings to her. ICE is conducting an investigation into the company.

The money was returned following an investigation by a multi-agency, joint U.S.-Canada initiative called Project COLT. Formed in the 1990s to combat telemarketing fraud in both countries, Project COLT includes the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, ICE, the FBI and the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, among other law enforcement and government agencies.

Robert Rutt, special agent-in-charge for the ICE office in Houston, warned Houston residents not to give out bank account information, mail monetary instruments or wire funds to persons they do not know. The federal government estimates that telemarketing fraud accounts for over \$40 billion dollars a year in losses to victims, mainly senior citizens.

"This victim thought this was a great opportunity to win some money, but when the offer sounds too good to be true, it probably is," said Rutt. "Don't let these con artists fool you. They are professionals skilled at bilking every dollar possible from their victims. Before sending a single cent, call the toll-free Project COLT hotline at: 888-495-8501."

Telemarketing fraud, which primarily targets elderly victims in the United States, has resulted in the loss of tens of millions of dollars by people who are least able to recover from financial loss. Victims often lose their entire life savings. Fraudulent telemarketers represent themselves as

lawyers, government officials, police officers, accountants or lottery company officials. The victims are told that they will receive a sum of money varying from thousands to millions of dollars in lottery winnings.

Since 1998, the Project COLT joint initiative has included agents from the following organizations: U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), FBI, U.S. Postal Inspection Service, Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), Sûreté du Québec (Quebec Provincial Police), Montreal City Police Department, Canada Post, and Competition Bureau. The focus of Project COLT is to identify, disrupt, and dismantle telemarketing fraud operations. Project COLT is a unit consisting of law enforcement officers who intercept funds (usually bank drafts and cashiers' checks), so they can be recovered and ultimately returned to victims. Project COLT Officers also work to prevent further victimization both through public education and the prosecution of those who commit the fraud.

Project COLT members also have formed partnerships with Canada Customs and Revenue, Canada Post Corporation, Federal Express, Purolator, United Parcel Service, DHL and other companies to assist with fund interception and return.

To report suspicious telemarketing activity, members of the public can contact Project COLT's hotline at 888-495-8501. For online information about Project COLT, visit: http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/qc/pro_ser/delits_e.htm

ICE

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement was established in March 2003 as the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security. ICE is comprised of five integrated divisions that form a 21st century law enforcement agency with broad responsibilities for a number of key homeland security priorities.